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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000752

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM SCUL PREL SOCI PGOV KIRF VM RELFREE HUMANR ETMIN

SUBJECT: PROTESTANT SOURCE DISCUSSES CENTRAL HIGHLANDS UNREST AND ARRESTS

1. (SBU) In a May 28 meeting with the Consul General, a reliable Protestant source reported that the April 10-11 Easter weekend unrest in the Central Highlands had resulted in the deaths of 10 ethnic minority persons in Gia Lai Province and another 190 in Dak Lak Province -- contrary to GVN claims of just two dead in both provinces. In addition, this Protestant source said 68 of the alleged "masterminds and leaders" had been arrested in Gia Lai on May 11 and 13. Because of these arrests, he had had to hurry back to Gia Lai from Ho Chi Minh City ahead of schedule. This prevented his meeting with EAP A/S James Kelly, who was visiting HCMC at the time, for which he apologized profusely.

2. (SBU) This Protestant source said he was present in one village in Gia Lai on April 10, when ethnic minority residents, who had gathered to attend church services, were met by suspicious police who thought a protest was underway. According to the source, the crowds were a mixture of believers (Protestants), Catholics, and non-believers. Despite his best efforts to persuade the authorities that these were merely peaceful worshippers on their way to Easter services, with no intention of participating in any demonstrations, the police maintained their presence and continued to monitor the crowd. When violence eventually erupted, our contact claims to have witnessed personally the deaths of two individuals -- one male teenager who was shot, and a 40-year-old male who died en route to the hospital after being beaten by what appeared to be plainclothes police officers. The Protestant source said he went to the hospital where some of the injured were treated and saw two large rooms filled with patients lying cheek-to-jowl, but he could not give a numerical estimate. He returned to the hospital on April 12 to check on those still injured. He counted about 30 people still there.

3. (SBU) Asked for his views on the root causes of the unrest, the source mentioned all of the longstanding ethnic minority frustrations over land, jobs, education, and discrimination (majority Vietnamese Kinh vs. ethnic minority peoples). He described at length the discrimination that ethnic minorities endured: arable land and good jobs went to the Vietnamese Kinh -- particularly those migrating down from the North -- not them; funds from UNICEF and other NGOs for hunger eradication programs, micro-loans, and building water wells focused on the poverty-stricken Vietnamese Kinh rather than ethnic minority peoples; and laws were enforced disproportionately against ethnic minority peoples (i.e. when ethnic minority peoples slashed and burned forested land for cultivation, they were arrested; when Vietnamese Kinh slashed and burned forested lands to create large coffee plantations, they got off scott-free).

4. (SBU) This Protestant source also confirmed that some persons in the U.S. had told ethnic minorities that the U.S. would come to their aid if they protested. In fact, the U.S. "would rescue and resettle" them. He himself had been called by someone named "Ksor Tan," (phonetic) who had tried to enlist his support (which he did not give). According to the source, many ethnic minority individuals are still in contact with U.S.-based groups, and he worries that something could happen at any time. While religion was a factor, this Protestant source noted that the government response to the protests did not appear aimed at any particular religious group. He believes that intercepted communications between the U.S. and the Central Highlands had tipped police off to the possibility of a demonstration. He also asserted that many ethnic minority persons had fled to the forest or hidden literally underground to avoid arrest or punishment by police. He could not give total numbers for the arrested or missing, saying that strict police surveillance made it difficult to corroborate these claims with family members of those believed to be in custody.

5. (SBU) The source also discussed his reluctance to travel to the U.S. during early June as part of a GVN-organized delegation on religious freedom in Vietnam. He did not want to damage his credibility or violate his Christian values by participating in a whitewash, but did not believe he would be allowed to refuse the invitation.

6. (SBU) COMMENT: After more than 15 meetings with ConGen officers over the course of 30 months, this was the most voluble and stressed-out that we have seen this reliable Protestant contact. He was clearly worried about his impending trip to the U.S. The GVN had taken possession of his recently-issued passport, and he had been given an airline ticket to Hanoi and

told to present himself there for the visa interview.

YAMAUCHI